

---

---

## PART III: WHERE TO FROM HERE?

In many ways, this report summarizes the depth and breadth of staff and public knowledge regarding the special places in Wisconsin at this point in time. Places have been identified for their value in helping meet a variety of current and future needs ranging from rare species habitats to off road trails to clean groundwater. The resulting inventory will no doubt need to be revisited and amended over time to reflect the perspectives, needs, and knowledge base of future generations. It provides a vision --albeit coarse and based on today's understanding of conservation requirements and recreation demands-- of the work that lies ahead in efforts to help "keep Wisconsin Wisconsin." As one can see, there is no shortage of opportunities to protect lands and waters that will be critical in meeting future conservation and recreation needs. Fortunately, the state has an engaged and farsighted citizenry, knowledgeable and dedicated staff at all levels of government, and a dynamic and very successful collection of organizations focused on conservation and recreation issues.

As work on the identification of important places draws to a close with the publication of this report, many will ask: What are we, as a society, going to do about the places identified here? Of those places where substantial protection efforts have already been initiated, what needs to be done to ensure that their conservation and recreation values are maintained? Of those where a substantial amount of protection work remains, which places are priorities? What are the best ways to protect these places? Who should be involved? These are questions for all citizens to help answer.

### **A. WHAT LIES AHEAD.**

The job of maintaining, conserving, and in some cases also restoring, our state's land legacy is a huge task, and is far more than any entity working alone can accomplish. Government agencies at all levels, elected officials, non-profit organizations, businesses, landowners, and citizens --rural and urban alike-- all have roles to play in ensuring that future generations enjoy the same quality of conservation and recreation opportunities that exist now.

There are, of course, many ways to protect our land and water resources. Some rural landowners, working by themselves, take great pride in successfully balancing their economic needs with dedication to managing their property for personal conservation or recreation purposes. Others prefer to work cooperatively with their neighbors with a goal of managing a larger network of private lands. Groups of citizens frequently work together, often through their local units of government, to protect land important in meeting local conservation or recreation needs. On a larger scale, some private non-profit

---

organizations (e.g., The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, rod and gun clubs, and local land trusts) work to protect and restore lands through other means. These initiatives can range from acquiring land through purchase or donation to providing funds to landowners for restoring wildlife habitat to organizing volunteer work groups to help landowners with management needs. Finally, citizens, through their elected representatives, authorize their local, state, and federal governments to regulate some aspects of how lands and waters are used and to purchase land for conservation and recreation purposes.

Identifying which protection strategies are most appropriate for the places identified in this report will primarily be a function of local needs, opportunities and attitudes. Landowners, local governments, conservation and recreation groups, and others will all need to be involved in creating protection plans that address the environmental, social, and economic conditions unique to each area. However, planning and implementing protection at each of the places identified in the report will not happen concurrently; rather, it will be driven by priorities, threats and opportunities. Non-profit organizations, citizen groups, government agencies, and others have diverse priorities and thus will concentrate their efforts on different types of places. As a result (and as occurs now), different collections of organizations will likely come together to address protection needs in different places. For example, the Upper Rock River (a Legacy Place running from Horicon Marsh to Fort Atkinson) may be a priority for local tourism groups interested in providing more recreation opportunities, statewide conservation groups interested in protecting high quality prairies and marshes along the river corridor, and cities and villages located along the river that are interested in water quality issues.

Each entity interested in conservation and recreation issues will continue to evaluate its protection priorities based on its view of needs and its perception of the greatest threats and opportunities. The Department's hope is that the inventory of places identified in this report can provide a common context as citizens, non-profit organizations, and government agencies evaluate the existing landscape and set priorities. For example, non-profit conservation organizations might begin by developing a list of the Legacy Places that best meet their priorities. Similarly, counties and municipalities could examine how the places identified in the report match up with their local needs. Local citizens might evaluate the list of places based upon threats and opportunities in their area to determine on which places to focus their resources. It is possible, if not likely, that many places identified in this report will not be an immediate priority for any organization, group, or agency.

From the Department's perspective, completion of this report allows us to see the full scope of places that the public and staff believe are critically important. As mentioned in Chapter 2(B), the Department approaches natural resource protection from many angles and has many programs that assist landowners and non-profit groups in protecting

### ***Local comprehensive planning***

This report could have particular value in helping local governments and citizens better understand the natural places of statewide significance in their region, county, and town. As such, it is the Department's hope that communities can apply information in this report as they develop the natural resource components of their comprehensive land use plans. Because the report purposely does not attempt to identify specific boundaries indicating where protection efforts should be focused or which strategies are most appropriate, it has decreasing value as the size of the planning area gets smaller. Answering the "who, what, where, how, and when" of implementing protection strategies is best left to the type of locally-led, more detailed evaluations that will occur as communities design and implement land use plans that reflect their unique needs and visions.

---

important places. The next step for the Department will be to develop an implementation plan in cooperation with interested publics. Several issues will arise during this process including how the Department can best integrate its efforts with other groups and organizations interested in maintaining and protecting the Legacy Places, and which places the public and Department consider to be priorities to initiate protection efforts. In the course of developing its implementation plan, the Department will be seeking input from the public and organizations interested in conservation and recreation issues.

To be sure, the Department will continue to assist landowners, local governments, and others throughout the state, not just within the Legacy Places. But it appears likely that past trends will continue - there will be an increasing demand to help citizens, landowners, industries, outdoor recreationists, and others meet the natural resource challenges that face the state. As such, the Department will need to continue its efforts to partner with others to sustain the state's natural resources, as well as focus its limited staff and funding on the places and protection techniques for which it is best suited. This report will help the Department focus its efforts on those places the staff and the public believe are most important in meeting long-term ecological and recreation needs.

## **B. PERSPECTIVES ON HOW MUCH PUBLIC CONSERVATION LAND IS ENOUGH.**

A motivating factor in initiating the Land Legacy study was a desire to know when the task of protecting important places in Wisconsin might be complete. More specifically, the Natural Resources Board wanted to better understand when the Department anticipated that there would no longer be a need to acquire properties for state parks, forests, and wildlife, fishery and natural areas. As mentioned earlier, with the Board's approval, the focus of the study shifted away from determining *how* places should be protected, because that is an issue best left to a locally-led, more detailed evaluation. Since no attempt is made to identify which lands may be appropriate for local, state or federal governments to attempt to acquire, the report does not offer a simple answer to the question, "how much public conservation land is enough?"

It is a difficult question to answer, in part because there are several facets to the question. To effectively determine how much public conservation land is needed could entail assessing species' viable population sizes and their associated habitat needs to support these populations, the need for the environmental services that lands in natural vegetation provide, and extent and distribution of demands for outdoor recreation. Finally, social acceptability and demand for public lands, as well as attitudes about private landowners' rights versus their responsibilities, play a crucial role in determining how much public conservation land is enough. The following discussion examines some different perspectives that provide some general indication for how

---

much public land may be needed to meet conservation and recreation demands.

### ***Ecological and Conservation Perspective***

From an ecological and conservation perspective, a collection of permanently protected lands that meet the long-term ecological needs of our biota and the habitats on which they depend is needed. Given our current understanding of the science of conservation, some of the highest priority needs appear to include: a representative collection of natural communities (large enough to be ecologically functional over time) within each of the state's sixteen ecological landscapes, adequate amounts of habitat to support viable populations of common and rare species, and an adequate network of corridors that allow species and natural communities to shift their range and distribution in response to various environmental changes.

But how much land is needed to accomplish these needs? One approach to finding an answer could involve weaving together the needs of target species or communities. Several studies evaluating conservation needs of species or groups of species have been completed and in some cases outline protection goals. For example, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan established a target for Wisconsin to support an annual breeding duck population of 560,000. To meet this goal, the Management Plan proposes that 290,000 acres of breeding waterfowl habitat (wetlands and associated uplands) be protected, in addition to the 1.5 million acres of suitable habitat that have already been protected by government and conservation organizations. Integrating similar studies of other species groups' protection needs, most of which have yet to be initiated, would be one approach to estimating total conservation needs.

Although over the past several decades much has been learned about many species' ecological needs, we have only a cursory understanding of how most natural communities (and assemblages of communities) function and their long-term protection and management needs. As a result, the amount and distribution of land needed to meet broader ecological goals remains only generally known. Some current research estimates that between 10 and 25% of an ecological region needs to be devoted to maintaining biological diversity to protect, with a reasonable degree of certainty, its species, ecological processes, and environmental functions.<sup>2</sup>

Lands do not necessarily need to be publicly owned in order to provide long-term ecological and conservation benefits. Private lands have played, and will continue to play, an essential role in providing for the habitat needs of native plants and animals. As mentioned previously in Chapter 2(B), there are a number of programs that are financed with public money that encourage private landowners to manage their property in certain ways. Some examples include the Wisconsin Managed Forest Law, Wisconsin Forest Landowner Grant Program, and federal Farm Bill programs like the Conservation Reserve Program,

---

Wetlands Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and others. Because these programs are limited term contracts -- typically ranging from 10 to 50 years-- they are excellent ways for landowners to "get their feet wet" with conservation management techniques.

However, by their very nature, private lands are often in some form of flux. Lands are bought and sold over time, landowners' attitudes and needs evolve, and their financial circumstances can change. As a result, land management objectives change much more frequently on private lands than on public lands and there is no assurance that the lands enrolled in these programs will continue in some form of conservation when the contract expires or the lands are withdrawn. Thus, in some cases, public acquisition of land offers some advantages in terms of permanence and management efficiency.

### ***Environmental Services Perspective***

Lands and waters provide many environmental services that support our way of life. Wetlands can act as giant sponges, soaking up and then slowly releasing floodwaters. Vegetative buffers along waterbodies can filter out pollutants and sediments keeping streams, rivers and lakes cleaner. Large forest blocks can store or "sequester" carbon thereby helping to reduce the amount released to the atmosphere. Groundwater recharge areas and the associated underground aquifers provide a large percentage of our state's drinking water.

How much publicly owned land is needed now, and will be needed in the future, to adequately provide environmental services is unknown. Future research to identify the most critical lands and waters to provide environmental services will likely require evaluating needs on a statewide or regional basis, rather than by ecological landscape, given the widespread nature of these types of services. As with ecological needs, lands critical in providing ecological services do not need to be publicly owned to meet their objective.

Population growth, changes in the rates of participation in different activities, the development of new types of recreation, and other factors will all influence the future demand for public lands.

### ***Recreation Demand Perspective***

Although some landowners allow general public access to their property, it is not appropriate to expect private landowners to accommodate public recreation demands. As such, unlike meeting ecological and environmental needs, providing public recreation opportunities essentially requires public land or access rights.

From a recreation perspective, identifying the long-term need for public land will likely be considerably more difficult to ascertain since the number of people participating in outdoor recreation, and where and how they wish to recreate, will fluctuate over time. Population growth, changes in the rates of participation in different activities, the development of new types of recreation, and other factors will all influence the future demand for public lands. In all probability, the demand for access to places to participate in outdoor recreation will nearly always exceed the public land "supply." Conflicts between those

---

enjoying different types of recreation will likely continue and result in additional demand for public lands.

The Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), which is a periodic evaluation of recreation needs and trends in the state, offers the best opportunity to develop consistent data on what residents and visitors want in their recreation experiences. Data collected over many years could help clarify trends and how different private companies, non-profit organizations, and public lands can best meet these needs.

### ***Social and Political Perspective***

The Department's ability to purchase lands is dependent on the public's support. Current surveys of public opinion consistently show that the overwhelming majority of Wisconsinites support the public acquisition of lands to meet conservation and recreation needs. The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship 2000 program remains a popular program across political parties. Hunters and anglers continue to support a self-imposed tax on their gear to fund (among other activities) the purchase and management of properties that provide important fish and wildlife habitat. Over 50,000 residents donated to the Endangered Resources Fund in part to help purchase critical habitat for rare species and natural areas. The demand for more public recreation areas, particularly in the southern and eastern portions of the state, far exceeds supply. Relative to other states east of the Rocky Mountains, Wisconsin ranks about in the middle for the percent of public conservation lands in the state. Compared to our immediate neighbors, we have substantially less public conservation land than Michigan and Minnesota but substantially more than Illinois and Iowa.

In one sense, the question, "how much public conservation land is enough?" is unanswerable in that each generation will make their own decision. Fifty years ago, it would have been exceedingly difficult to develop a plan identifying the "right" amount of public conservation land, road miles, or classrooms for the state of Wisconsin in the year 2003. Today's citizens are the best judges of today's needs; likewise, our children, grandchildren, and future generations can evaluate their needs and opportunities in their decision-making. Yet, they will make land use and resource management decisions based on the set of parks, forests, and wildlife, fishery, and natural areas we pass on to them - just as we make decisions today based on the portfolio of protected places we "inherited." And, possibly, it is in this light that the value of this inventory of important places best shines.

How much public conservation land is enough? There is neither a correct or final answer; each generation will evaluate its social, political, ecological, environmental, and recreation needs for Wisconsin.

How much public conservation land is enough? There is neither a correct or final answer; each generation will evaluate its social, political, ecological, environmental, and recreation needs for Wisconsin.

---

## C. REMAINING ISSUES AND NEEDS

Through the course of preparing this report, a number of issues have arisen from the public and staff regarding land protection priorities and needs. The Legacy Places, as a collection, address many of these issues. A few issues and needs, however, fall outside the scope of this report and are briefly described below in an effort to help begin a dialogue on how best they may be resolved.

### ***Buffers***

A primary concern is the need to buffer many, if not nearly all, public conservation lands. Local, state, and federal properties provide critical habitats that help support our state's biodiversity as well as much-demanded outdoor recreation opportunities. In some cases, adjacent lands are managed or developed in ways that conflict with the ecological or recreation values of the public properties. For example, because it is illegal and unsafe to hunt within 300 feet of a building, when houses are built adjacent to wildlife areas they can infringe on the hunting use of the property. Similarly, developments along the boundaries of many natural areas and parks can detract from their ecological and scenic values.

With the growing number of housing developments in rural areas, it is not surprising that public conservation lands are viewed as a particularly attractive "neighbor" for many people. These lands tend to be scenic, open spaces that will remain undeveloped. From the perspective of someone looking to build a house in the country, few places are more appealing than those next to a park, forest, or wildlife, fishery, or natural area. As a result, public conservation lands, particularly in the southern and eastern parts of the state, are increasingly ringed with housing.

The Department, local governments, and non-profit groups will need to find ways to buffer public properties to ensure that they maintain their ecological and recreation values. For many of these properties, the public has invested a considerable sum in acquiring and managing them and operating a variety of recreation facilities. Establishing adequate buffers around these lands appears a logical, and much needed, component of long-term protection.

### ***Connecting corridors***

Many public conservation lands, particularly smaller properties, are isolated. If these places were connected to nearby conservation lands, their ecological and recreation values would be dramatically increased. Corridors of sufficient width can facilitate the movement of species from one area to another. This is often beneficial because it allows populations that would otherwise be isolated to exchange genetic material, helping to keep plant and animal populations healthy. If wide enough, corridors themselves can provide useable habitat for many species. Over longer periods of time, corridors can also allow some plant populations to "migrate" from one area to another. To be most

---

effective, Wisconsin's network of public lands should connect with public or conservation lands in surrounding states.

Corridors connecting public conservation lands also provide the opportunity to establish a variety of different recreation trails. Given the growing popularity of trail-based recreation, a network of trails established between public conservation lands would likely be exceptionally popular. Because both population centers and public properties tend to be centered on or are located near rivers and streams, riparian corridors could play an important role in such a network. In addition to providing connections, riparian corridors could also provide many biological and water quality benefits.

Establishing corridors, both those serving ecological and recreational needs, will likely be most successful if existing land use patterns and regulations are recognized. For example, environmental corridors identified in sewer service area plans, shorelands, utility corridors, and areas zoned as conservation lands in local land use plans may offer excellent opportunities, particularly near urban areas, to build a network of corridors.

### ***Small scale additions to existing public conservation lands***

The Department is authorized to purchase lands within acquisition projects approved by the Natural Resources Board and the Governor. In most cases, these "acquisition projects" are distinct, named places such as Devil's Lake State Park or Horicon Marsh State Wildlife Area. Boundaries for these projects are determined during an evaluation of an area's conservation characteristics and recreation opportunities, as well as the public's support for Department ownership in the area. This evaluation process is known as a feasibility study.

In addition, a small number of projects are more "generic" and focus on a resource need rather than a location. For example, the NRB and Governor have authorized the Department to purchase high quality natural areas, small scattered fishery lands, and boat access sites as generic goals, without the need to establish individual project boundaries.

Over time, in some cases it can become apparent that lands critical to a property's ability to meet its conservation and recreation objectives lie just outside of existing boundaries. Similarly, because boundaries were not always originally established to coincide with roads, problems with providing adequate public access can arise. Currently, the Department has only limited authority to purchase lands that lie outside of an established boundary without conducting another in-depth, and possibly lengthy, feasibility study. Simplifying the Department's process of including critical lands within property boundaries would allow for more efficient use of staff time.



---

### ***New ways to protect places***

As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2(B), lands and waters are protected by a variety of means. A recurring message heard at nearly all public and staff meetings held during the preparation of this report was the need to develop new ways to protect important places. Of particular interest to many people was the development of mechanisms that financially reward private landowners that manage their property in ways that help meet statewide conservation and/or public recreation needs. The most common suggestion from the public was to broaden, or establish a program similar to, the Managed Forest Law (MFL) for lands that help meet other natural resource needs (e.g., grasslands, wetlands, barrens). The MFL program provides property tax relief for landowners that enter and implement an approved, long-term forest management plan. The program has proven to be popular with landowners and effective at helping the state meet multiple forestry goals.

## **D. ERRORS, OMISSIONS, AND UPDATES**

Obviously, it is simply not possible to identify all the places in Wisconsin that may be valuable in meeting the state's recreation and conservation needs over the next fifty years. Most certainly, some extremely important places have been missed. Similarly, unanticipated opportunities to protect places and resources will arise that are viewed as too good to pass up. Although this report is meant to identify the best places to meet future conservation and recreation needs, it is not intended to exclude places from consideration for protection, simply because they are not identified here. Future generations will evaluate their needs and the landscape we leave behind, and determine what places are important to them.

Recognizing the changing nature of our natural world and social and economic needs, this report is intended to be updated on a periodic basis. Although the criteria that were used to identify Legacy Places may need only moderate revisions and clarifications over the next ten, twenty, or thirty years, the places considered to best meet the criteria in the future will no doubt differ from our current vision. The frequency of revisions to this report will depend on future conditions and opportunities.

### **NOTES**

1. See [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GCTTable?ds\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SF1\\_U&geo\\_id=04000US55&\\_box\\_head\\_nbr=GCT-PH1&format=ST-7](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GCTTable?ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&geo_id=04000US55&_box_head_nbr=GCT-PH1&format=ST-7).
2. Stein, Bruce A., Lynn S. Kutner, and Jonathan S. Adams. *Precious Heritage: The status of biodiversity in the United States*. The Nature Conservancy and the Association for Biodiversity Information. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Although this report is meant to identify the best places to meet future conservation and recreation needs, it is not intended to exclude places from consideration for protection, simply because they are not identified here. Future generations will evaluate their needs and the landscape we leave behind, and determine what places are important to them.



---

---

## Closing Remarks

By its nature, approaching the identification of important places with a 50-year vision creates a far different list than would develop from ten, 5-year plans conducted consecutively. Short-term plans are typically driven by current threats and opportunities - which places are most in need of protection *right now* and which landowners have expressed an interest in protecting an important resource or place (usually manifested in the desire to sell a large block of land). Although there is nothing inherently wrong with developing short-term plans, it can be difficult for the public and Department staff to see how day-to-day actions fit into longer-term land protection goals.

To help develop the long-term vision presented in this report, Department staff and the public were asked to evaluate the state's needs through the eyes of their children and grandchildren - to imagine how they will look back on our efforts, just as we look back now on our predecessors' past actions. Without completely ignoring current realities, the goal of this report is to present those places that are believed to be most important in meeting Wisconsin's long-term conservation and recreation needs, not which places are currently most threatened or would be easiest to protect.

Should we expect to protect all the Legacy Places identified in this report? No, that's unrealistic, if for no other reason than some of these places will not be considered worthy of formal protection efforts in the future. Even over fifty years, the Department can probably only help protect a relatively small subset of these Legacy Places. The daily management activities of rural landowners, the countless decisions made by local governments, and the votes of residents --from those living in big cities to those on the family farm-- will continue to play the most important role in determining the long-term quality of these Legacy Places.

As the Department, local governments, non-profit groups, landowners, and citizens develop strategies to protect places identified in the report, it will be important that protection efforts not become solely focused on trying to stop development. Important places should be protected in a way that focuses on their exceptional conservation and recreation values, not because someone has proposed a housing, commercial, or industrial development. We need houses, highways, shopping malls, landfills, gravel pits, and the many other land uses that accompany our modern society. To be effective, protection strategies must address how our "green infrastructure" (conservation and recreation lands) fits into our developed infrastructure (cities, villages, towns) and our working farms and forests.

The goal of this report is to present those places that are believed to be most important in meeting Wisconsin's long-term conservation and recreation needs, not which places are currently most threatened or would be easiest to protect.

---

The flip side is equally true – the scattered developments occurring through our rural landscape have long-term impacts on our ability as a state to provide successful conservation and recreation lands and healthy farm and forest industries. Waiting to establish a protection strategy for important places until developments are proposed is likely to be ineffective and frustrating.

In many ways, this is a “golden era” of conservation. Remarkable progress has been made over the last few decades in understanding the science of conservation. Our state’s population supports conservation with a deep conviction. We have learned from past mistakes and recognize that a strong economy and a well-protected environment are the key ingredients in maintaining our exceptional quality of life. And, as a result, Wisconsin is blessed with an extraordinary array of special places.

The world has changed. In some ways, we live on an increasingly small planet; in other ways, more social, cultural, and economic barriers between peoples and nations exist now than ever. Although many aspects of our lives will continue to change, some things will remain constant, like our need for places where we can go with friends and family to connect with the natural wonder of the outdoors and with each other. Places to watch prairie chickens dance. Clean lakes where grandparents can teach grandchildren how to fish. And quiet places to talk over a campfire.

In the year 2048, Wisconsin will celebrate its bicentennial. By then, parts of this report will no doubt look somewhat naïve. But our hope is that this report, in some small way, will have helped create a land legacy that future citizens are pleased and proud to inherit.

In the year 2048, Wisconsin will celebrate its bicentennial. By then, parts of this report will no doubt look somewhat naïve. But our hope is that this report, in some small way, will have helped create a land legacy that future citizens are pleased and proud to inherit.

Robert W. Roden  
Land Legacy Study Director  
Director, Bureau of Facilities and Lands

Steven W. Miller  
Administrator  
Division of Land

